

New scholarship helping young students count on college

By Ann Daley

Executive Director, Higher Education Coordinating Board

In the 1950s and 60s, a lot of us grew up expecting to go to college. My family taught me early on that higher education was not only the ticket to “a good job,” but something I was supposed to pursue. That expectation is part of the reason why Washington’s baby boomers are the most highly educated generation in our history.

Times are changing. Baby boomers are retiring at a steady pace. Jobs are evolving to reflect a more knowledge-based economy, requiring higher levels of education. And other countries are already surpassing the United States in educating their college-age populations to record levels, challenging our nation’s higher education system to keep pace.

And here in Washington, demographic trends are on a crash course with an entire generation of expectations.

We know that students from low-income families who complete high school are considerably less likely to go to college immediately after high school (46 percent nationally) than their peers from high-income families (77 percent).

When compared to other states, Washington ranks 32nd in the percentage of low-income students participating in post-secondary education. Within 10 years, these students will represent a third of all Washington high school graduates.

Years ago, the expectation that my generation would go to college paid off. Today, it is critical that we return to that principle, and begin to re-instill in young students and their families the belief that college is part of their future.

Last year, the governor and Legislature took a big step toward this goal by establishing the College Bound Scholarship. The program was the brainchild of Gov. Chris Gregoire’s Washington Learns committee, and in 2007, Sen. Phil Rockefeller (D-Kitsap County) sponsored legislation to create the College Bound Scholarship in statute.

The scholarship covers college tuition, fees and books for students from low-income families who sign a pledge in 7th or 8th grade promising to graduate from high school and demonstrate good citizenship, and is guaranteed for students who meet the eligibility criteria.

To receive the scholarship, students must:

- Apply during their 7th or 8th grade year;
- Graduate from a Washington high school or home school and apply for admission at an eligible public or private Washington college, university, community college or career school;
- Maintain a cumulative 2.0 GPA;
- Meet the family income requirements at the time of high school graduation (65 percent or less than the state's median family income – which is currently \$47,000 for a family of four); and
- Be a good citizen throughout middle and high school.

Foster youth are automatically eligible to apply.

To fund the program, the 2007 Legislature allocated \$7.4 million, which will pay for the first two years of the program beginning in 2012.

The College Bound Scholarship is intended to fill the gap between the State Need Grant and the actual cost of college, while also offering a measure of certainty for younger students who would otherwise fear they won't be able to afford college.

Students can apply online at: www.hecb.wa.gov/collegebound, or call 1-888-535-0747 for more information.

The College Bound Scholarship is a sound investment in our state's future, whether economic, societal, or personal. And like the expectations some of us grew up with in the 50s and 60s, it has a very real potential to change lives.

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Ann Daley has been executive director of the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board since February 2007. Prior to joining the HECB, she was the executive director of Washington Learns, and has held senior management positions in several key state agencies. Daley served as vice president for administration and finance at The Evergreen State College from 2001 to 2004, and as a University of Washington Regent from 1995 to 1997.